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COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW
March/April 1986

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After a year-long investigation, reporters Tony Avirgan (on stretcher), who was wounded in the Pastora bombing, and Martha Honey (arm outstretched) believe Pastora's would-be assassin was a Libyan exile (inset).

Whodunit: the Pastora bombing

The bomb that ripped through Eden Pastora's jungle headquarters near the Costa Rican border on the night of May 30, 1984, failed to kill the anti-Sandinista rebel leader, but it left three journalists dead and more than a dozen wounded. The assassination attempt during a press conference called by Pastora shocked Costa Rica and was one of the country's biggest news stories since the Sandinistas came to power in neighboring Nicaragua in 1979.

It may receive some more attention in the United States, thanks to two American journalists who have investigated the bombing and have concluded that there is evidence of United States complicity.

Tony Avirgan, now a free-lance cameraman working for CBS and a correspondent with National Public Radio and the BBC, covered the Pastora press conference for ABC News and suffered shrapnel wounds and burns. His wife, Martha Honey, is a stringer for *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* of London and for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Supported by grants from the Committee to Protect Journalists, the Newspaper Guild, and the World Press Freedom Committee — plus more than $20,000 of their savings — the two spent more than a year following up on the myriad leads that emerged after the bombing. Last fall, the results of their investigation were published in an eighty-four-page report which details what they describe as the roles of Costa Rican officials, Central Intelligence Agency operatives, contras, and anti-Castro Cuban-Americans in planning and executing the bombing. The report identifies Pastora's would-be assassin as Amac Galil, an anti-Qaddafi Libyan exile allegedly recruited by the CIA in Chile. The report also accuses some U.S. and Costa Rican authorities of hampering efforts by local police to investigate the bombing and asserts that a sophisticated disinformation campaign — launched from Washington — tried to shift the blame onto Basque terrorists allegedly in the hire of the Sandinista government.

Avirgan and Honey's report has since become the basis of a lawsuit on behalf of several of those injured in the bombing. After months of research by attorneys associated with the National Lawyers Guild in Philadelphia, a group including Avirgan has decided to seek damages from individuals whom they believe to be responsible for the bombing. Among the defendants will be John Hull, an American farmer in Costa Rica who is widely suspected of helping to train and supply contra troops, as well as several Miami residents believed to be tied to the anti-Castro terror groups Omega 7 and Brigade 2506.

Claims against U.S. government officials are also being considered. "We'll argue that the government, or people involved with the government, intended to interfere with the constitutional rights of U.S. citizens," says Judith Brown Chomsky, one of the attorneys preparing the suit. "Another possibility is a suit argued on First Amendment grounds — that the choice of bombing a news conference was designed to discourage the press and to interfere with the press trying to cover what's happening in Nicaragua."

Meanwhile, Avirgan and Honey are themselves being sued. Following the publication of their report, John Hull and another man implicated by the investigation, Costa Rican Colonel Rodrigo Paniagua, filed libel suits against the journalists, demanding a total of $750,000 in damages. Paniagua's suit has been dismissed, but Hull's is still pending.

Under Costa Rican libel law, the burden of proof is on the defendants. "First we have to prove what we said is true, then we have to prove we wrote without malice," Avirgan says. But Avirgan and Honey are confident they will prevail. Working in the couple's favor is the fact that allegations of Hull's involvement with the CIA surfaced long before the Pastora bombing. Avirgan himself was part of an ABC News crew that recorded landings of CIA-supplied planes on Hull's property in northern Costa Rica. In addition, two Americans who were arrested by Costa Rican security forces in a raid on a contra camp identified Hull and his associates as links between the contras and U.S. intelligence officials.

For Avirgan and Honey, their lives since the day of the bombing have been punctuated by violence and fear. One of their principal sources, a contra identified only by the pseudonym "David," disappeared and, according to Costa Rican security officials, has been murdered. Another source fled the country after his home was fired upon by a passing car. In the wake of death threats prior to the publication of their report, the Costa Rican government supplied armed guards to stay in Avirgan and Honey's home and the couple sent their two children to live with relatives in the U.S.

Throughout, U.S. officials in Costa Rica have been unsympathetic. Ambassador Lewis Tambs denounced Avirgan and Honey's report, calling them "madmen" and "traitors." "He said we were traitors to our country, that we only did [the investigation] for the money," Avirgan says. "If we thought that suing for libel was a good idea, I guess we should be suing him."

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Joel Millman is a free-lance writer who lives in New York.

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